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Letter dated 20 February 2008 from the Permanent Representative of Uzbekistan to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to convey to you the information regarding the measures being undertaken in the Republic of Uzbekistan on promoting and protecting the rights and interests of women (see annex).

I would appreciate it if you could circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the sixty-second session of the General Assembly under agenda item 63.

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Information on efforts to ensure women's rights in the Republic of Uzbekistan

Since becoming an independent State, the Republic of Uzbekistan has demonstrated its commitment to the principles of gender equality. Systematic legal and institutional development of the national mechanism for improving the situation of women began in 1995, when Uzbekistan became a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

Accession to the United Nations "women's" convention, the Convention on the Political Rights of Women and the Convention concerning Maternity Protection, together with the signing of the Beijing Platform for Action at the Fourth World Conference on Women, provided the necessary international legal framework for developing specific national measures to implement international standards in legislation and in the activities of government bodies.

The provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women have been implemented in the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan and in legislation on electoral, family, labour, criminal, administrative and other issues. The President of the Republic of Uzbekistan has adopted two relevant decrees: one to enhance the role of women in state and social construction (2 March 1995) and another on additional measures to support the activities of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan (24 May 2004). The Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan has also adopted the appropriate rulings for implementation of the presidential decrees.

The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan contains the basic provisions for the equal rights of men and women, defines the principles of maternal and child welfare and, most importantly, prohibits discrimination against any person on the basis of gender, age, nationality, social status or religion. There is no gender asymmetry in the constitutional provisions: each person in Uzbekistan has the same political, civil, socio-economic and cultural rights.

In Uzbekistan a specific legal mechanism has been established to ensure the equality of men and women. Article 46 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan refers to the equality of rights of men and women and a system of guarantees has been established to ensure such equality. They provide for, inter alia: the same opportunities for men and women in social, political and cultural activities, in access to education and professional training and in labour and labour remuneration; special measures for women's occupational health and safety, pension benefits; conditions that enable women to combine work with motherhood; legal protection, and material and moral support for mothers and children, including the provision of paid leave and other benefits for pregnant women and mothers. Gender equality is also enshrined in the civil, labour, family, criminal and other codes.

Uzbekistan is a party to a large number of international legal instruments which have contributed to the development of international standards and regulations for the political, socio-economic and cultural rights of women. Uzbekistan is a party to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949), the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (1952); the

Convention on the Nationality of Married Women (1957), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979), and is a signatory to the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1955).

Uzbekistan also applies other international legal instruments in its efforts to ensure women's rights. They include the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984), the Convention against Discrimination in Education (1960), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990), the ILO Convention concerning Equal Remuneration for Men and Women Workers for Work of Equal Value, 1951 (ILO Convention No. 100); the ILO Convention concerning Maternity Protection (1956), (ILO Convention No. 103); the ILO Convention concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation, 1958 (ILO Convention No. 111), the ILO Convention concerning Employment Policy, 1964 (ILO Convention No. 122) (all of the above conventions have been ratified by Uzbekistan).

Uzbekistan, as a State signatory to the Millennium Declaration, also has the obligation to include the Millennium Development Goals in national development programmes and to meet the Goals by the target year of 2015, including Goal 3: "promote gender equality and empower women".

The most significant provisions of the 1979 Convention have been enshrined in the legislation of the Republic of Uzbekistan:

- The principle of equality of men and women;
- The adoption of special sanctions prohibiting discrimination against women;
- The modification of existing laws, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women;
- Equal rights of men and women to enjoy all economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights.

According to article 4 of the Convention, not only measures aimed at protecting maternity but also "temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women" shall not be considered discriminatory. The Republic of Uzbekistan has therefore established special benefits for working women and a 30 per cent quota for women in the national legislative elections.

Eliminating discrimination against women in all areas of life is one of the Government's policy priorities. To this end, the Uzbek National Human Rights Centre, together with State, social and non-governmental organizations, prepared a bill on State guarantees of equal rights and equal opportunities for men and women which underwent national and international review and in March 2006 was submitted for consideration to the legislative chamber of the Oliy Majlis (Parliament) of Uzbekistan. The bill is very important in terms of resolving gender issues in today's world as it is designed to regulate the legal framework that prevents any direct, indirect or hidden gender-based discrimination in society and any violation of women's equal rights in the sphere of education, culture or reproduction or in family relations. The law is designed to promote equal relations between spouses and cooperation in all areas of activity.

As the Republic of Uzbekistan has acceded to many international instruments concerned with women's rights, a system for the preparation of national reports on fulfilment of the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and compliance with the national plans of action for implementation of the concluding recommendations of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Uzbekistan's initial national report on compliance with the 1979 Convention was prepared in 1999 and was considered by the Committee on 29 January 2001 at its 24th session. A national plan of action for 2001-2006 was prepared and adopted in order to comply with the Committee's concluding recommendations.

On 10 August 2006, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women considered the combined second and third periodic report of Uzbekistan on compliance with its obligations under the Convention. On completing its consideration, the Committee presented its concluding comments and offered a positive assessment of Uzbekistan's timely national report and of its progress in ensuring women's rights.

The Women's Committee and the National Human Rights Centre, in conjunction with interested State bodies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), prepared a national plan of action to implement the concluding comments of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women for the period 2007-2010, which included specific measures to strengthen women's participation in all areas of life.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women establishes three main conditions for equal rights of persons of both sexes in the political sphere. States parties have the obligation to ensure that women have the following rights on an equal basis with men: (1) to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies; (2) to participate in the formulation of government policy and the implementation thereof and to hold public office and perform all public functions at all levels of government; (3) to participate in non-governmental organizations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country; and (4) to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

Government policy relating to women's rights in Uzbekistan is being prepared and enhanced in these very areas.

Since the achievement of independence by Uzbekistan, women have had more opportunities for active participation in the decision-making process. Amendments to national law which were initiated by women's governmental and non-governmental organizations and the adoption of special presidential decrees (in 1995 and 2004) on support for women's NGOs that promoted women's participation in political activity has significantly increased the number of women parliamentarians.

Article 22, paragraph 4, of the act on elections to the Oliy Majlis of the Republic of Uzbekistan of 29 August 2003 provides that the number of women nominated as candidates for Parliament by the political parties should be no less than 30 per cent of the total number of candidates. At present there are 21 women deputies in the Legislative Chamber (18 per cent) and 15 women members of the

Senate of the Oliy Majlis (15 per cent), whereas in 1999 there were only 12 women deputies in the Oliy Majlis.

Women account for 16 per cent of officials in the highest State authorities of Uzbekistan and 15.2 per cent in local legislative and representative authorities. Women account for 3.4 per cent of officials in executive bodies and 22.7 per cent in judicial bodies.

A new course was recently introduced that is designed to increase the number of women in executive posts in Uzbekistan. Recent figures indicate that women occupy 15.3 per cent of senior executive posts, accounting for: 16.7 per cent of Cabinet Ministers; 12.5 per cent of members of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Karakalpakstan; and 11.9 per cent of *khokim* and deputy *khokims* (local executive authorities) in the city of Tashkent.

The Chairperson of the Women's Committee is also a Deputy Prime Minister and the chairpersons of the regional women's committees are the deputy *khokims* of the corresponding territories (14 regional and 219 district or city deputy *khokims*). The Minister responsible for the furniture industry and two First Deputy Ministers (in the ministries of finance and economics), one head of a large social organization (the Council of the Federation of Trade Unions), the chairperson of a parliamentary group (Adolat) and the chairpersons of three large public foundations are also women.

Women have generally adequate representation among officials in the judiciary in Uzbekistan. As of 1 January 2006, women accounted for: 23.5 per cent of officials working in the Constitutional Court and 23.3 per cent in the Supreme Court; 22.8 per cent of officials in the Supreme Court of Karakalpakstan, regional courts, the Tashkent city court and district and city courts; 13.8 per cent of officials in the Higher Economic Court and 17.3 per cent in the economic courts of the Republic of Karakalpakstan and the regions.

The proportion of women and men among economically active persons at the outset of the new century was 44 per cent and 56 per cent, respectively. Traditional areas of employment for women are education, health, culture, art, science and scientific support services.

Every year about 400,000 new jobs are created in Uzbekistan, over 40 per cent of them intended for women.

The economic recovery in Uzbekistan that has begun in recent years has had a positive impact on the situation of women as it has led to an expansion of their employment opportunities and to increases in minimum and average wages, pension provisions, maternity benefits and child benefits. The Labour Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan enshrines the legal mechanisms for the social protection of women in employment. In accordance with article 68 of the Labour Code, the Government provides additional safeguards for persons who are in need of social protection, have difficulties in finding work or are unable to compete on equal terms in the labour market (including single parents and parents with many children under the age of 14 years or with disabled children).

Under article 224-84 of the Labour Code, employers may not refuse to hire women workers or reduce their wages for reasons associated with pregnancy or children. This article also provides for women to be hired without pregnancy testing.

According to article 228-1 of the Labour Code, women who have children under the age of three years and who work in State-financed institutions or organizations benefit from reduced working hours of no more than thirty-five hours per week They receive the same remuneration as workers in the relevant category who work the full week.

The Government of Uzbekistan is constantly working on the issue of women's employment and is thereby tackling the problem of their economic independence. Two presidential decrees have made a significant contribution in the area of employment and in increasing the level of income of the population: the decree of 18 May 2007 on additional measures for the material and moral support of young families, which is designed to enhance the social situation of young families and to provide them with the necessary assistance at the beginning of their economic activity; and the decree of 5 January 2006 on measures to promote cooperation between large industrial enterprises and the provision of services through home-based work.

At the beginning of 2007, there was rapid growth in the economic participation rate, especially of women, owing to the development of new forms of home-based work. In the first quarter of 2007 alone, 8,800 jobs were created through arrangements with large industrial enterprises and 13,100 jobs in connection with family entrepreneurship. Home-based work has provided significant opportunities for women to increase their economic potential, combine housework with production and earn money without having to leave the family home.

To improve the employment situation, the Government of Uzbekistan has set up regional programmes for the period 2005-2007 to provide employment for women. They are to create the number of jobs needed in each region, mainly in the form of small businesses, service-sector jobs and home-based work. Preferential loans are provided for small businesses that employ mainly women workers and are run by women.

The creation of social rehabilitation centres for women based on the apprenticeship system has helped *makhallyas* (neighbourhood councils) in remote rural areas to organize home-based work for women, retrain women for new occupations and develop areas for family entrepreneurship. They provide the necessary resources and tools, and also assistance in exploiting opportunities for organizing production and marketing for women's home-based work (experience has been acquired in Bukhara, Syrdarya, Navoi, Namangan, Samarkand and Fergana).

The Centre for Market Infrastructure Development of Uzbekistan's Chamber of Commerce and Industry organizes special courses for women on an ongoing basis on topics such as "Start Your Own Business" and "Understanding Business".

In Uzbekistan women have equal rights with men in all areas of activity, including education. At present, nine years of education is compulsory for every girl of school age. After that period, girls have a wide choice of specialties and skills which they can study at specialized secondary, vocational and technical or higher education institutions. There is no discrimination against girls in education.

At the beginning of the 2004-2005 school year, the Republic's educational system had 65 academic secondary schools and 827 vocational schools. The academic secondary schools served 30,500 students, 35.9 per cent of which were

girls. The vocational schools served 757,600 students, 47.3 per cent of which were girls.

As for students entering higher education institutions in the 2004-2005 school year, women accounted for 44.2 per cent of the 54,200 students who began their Bachelor's degrees, and 34 per cent of those embarking on Master's degrees.

Over 6.5 million students are enrolled in the educational system of Uzbekistan and 48.4 per cent of them are women. The literacy rate among women is 92.8 per cent. There is no gender division in schools of general education and other educational institutions — girls and boys study together.

The pension system of Uzbekistan provides women with significant advantages and benefits. The State Pension Provision Act of the Republic of Uzbekistan, which came into force on 1 July 1994, makes no distinction among citizens according to sex. This act provides for three types of pensions: for retirement, disability and survivorship. A presidential decree of 1999 established that women were eligible to receive a pension at the age of 54 years.

Pursuant to article 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, States Parties must take all appropriate measures to ensure to women, on equal terms with men and without any discrimination, the opportunity to represent their Governments at the international level and to participate in the work of international organizations.

In line with other countries' experience, women represent the Government at international level as (1) Heads of State or Government or senior State officials of ministerial rank; (2) parliamentary deputies or senators; heads of subsidiary offices of parliament, Government or Government departments, etc.; (3) middle managers in the legislative, executive or judicial authorities delegated by senior officials or entities to take part in the work of international organizations or in international events; (4) employees of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of External Economic Relations, Trade and Investment and other departments dealing with external political or economic relations as ambassadors, consuls, representatives of the State to international organizations, as trade representatives and so on.

As a result of Uzbekistan's international practice, women generally take a very active part in international events as representatives of Government departments in which they work. Accordingly, it has become routine for individuals including the Chairperson of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan; the Commissioner for Human Rights (Ombudsman) for the Oliy Majlis of Uzbekistan; the chairperson of the Council of the Federation of Trade Unions of Uzbekistan and women members of the legislative chamber and senate to be involved in the activities of international organizations.

Non-governmental organizations have been making a substantial contribution to addressing gender equality issues.

The total number of women's NGOs of various kinds registered with the justice authorities stands at approximately 210. They include national and local organizations and the sub-offices of women's NGOs with central offices.

One of the foremost of the women's NGOs currently in existence is the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan. It was founded in 1991, and remains the organization with the most substantial and widespread presence. It has sections in

almost every *tuman* (district) and *viloyat* (province) and has immense significance in the tasks of guaranteeing, protecting and advancing women's rights in general. Its charter establishes the following as fundamental duties: to implement State policy relating to social and legal support for women; to protect motherhood and childhood; to expand women's participation in building up the State and society and increase their legal literacy and culture; to monitor and coordinate the efforts of other women's NGOs in connection with improving women's status in society and improving their legal literacy and social protection; to take part in implementing state programmes to protect women's health; to work with other NGOs to build healthy families; to disseminate the concept of a healthy lifestyle; to address on the ground the issue of women's employment, and to examine social protection for underprivileged families, families with many children, disabled women, children, people living alone and older people.

A major part of the Women's Committee's activity is to strengthen mutual understanding and cooperation with electoral bodies, political parties and civic organizations. A "women's wing" established in every political party organizes events to prepare women to take part in elections. A database has been compiled of women leaders of political parties, and women's activity within them is being examined to produce a statistical analysis.

The Politklub event conducted on 14 April 2006 in accordance with a plan developed by the Committee with deputies and political parties and held at the Academy of State- and community-building attached to the Office of the President played a significant role in improving political activity and legal literacy.

In recent times, the number of women in political parties in Uzbekistan has been rising. In 2005, women accounted for 34.2 per cent of the members of the National Democratic Party, 33.1 per cent of the members of the Liberal Democratic Party, 45.6 per cent of Milliy Tiklanish, 40.7 per cent of Fidokorlar and 38 per cent of Adolat.

A number of other NGOs, including the association of women scientists, Olima, and Ayol va salomatlik, were founded on the initiative of the Women's Committee.

The next largest NGO in Uzbekistan is the association of businesswomen, Tadbirkor ayol. It was registered with the justice authorities in 1991 and now has sections in every *viloyat* in the country, as well as the city of Tashkent and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Its main aims are: to establish a favourable environment for the rapid adjustment of women to developments in the labour market; to support entrepreneurship by women; to protect the rights of women entrepreneurs; to articulate the interests of its members; to contribute to various forms of entrepreneurship, and to consolidate a climate of trust and reliability in business partnership.

The Olima association of women scientists, as already pointed out, was founded on the initiative of the Women's Committee. It dates back to 1992, and now also has sections in every province of the country as well as the city of Tashkent and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. It was established to support and develop women's creative potential and to help to exploit their intellectual opportunities. Its main goals and functions are: to help to exploit women's professional, creative and business potential to the fullest; to help to improve women's professional rank and qualifications; to expand access to new fields of knowledge; to provide women with

advisory, legal, social and other supporting connection with organizing scientific undertakings; to help women to ensure that their career progress keeps pace with their qualifications, and to ensure that women are proposed for managerial and other posts in local, national and international organizations.

One of the next candidates in significance is a specialized NGO, the society of women jurists of Uzbekistan, founded in 1999 with the aim of consolidating the efforts of women jurists, improving their qualifications and defending their rights and legal interests. Its main activities are the following: disseminating legal knowledge in the population, particularly women and girls; providing legal advice, and developing, publishing and distributing law-related teaching materials, manuals and books. The association has sections in five towns in Uzbekistan (Fergana, Samarkand, Nukus, Bukhara and Jizzax).

The Women's Assembly association has contributed substantially to the activity of NGOs. It was founded by women drawn not to feminist ideas, but to thoughts of the family, healthy motherhood and the proper upbringing of the next generation.

The focus of the Women's Assembly's attention is motherhood and the family. Its aim is to support the women of the country and to combine forces to address problems, open up new opportunities for self-fulfilment, and to enable children and teenagers to receive a proper upbringing and education.

In addition to the national, regional and local women's NGOs, a number of international women's NGOs are active in Uzbekistan. They include the international women's fund Sharq Ayoli. Its fundamental aim is to implement and protect women's economic, social and cultural rights and freedoms; to improve their representation in all spheres of State and community life; to develop women's scientific and artistic creativity; to protect women's and children's health; to strengthen women's nurturing role in the family and society, and to strengthen peace and understanding between peoples. The fund has representatives in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

Another important contribution is made by the National Association of NGOs of Uzbekistan, founded on 18 May 2005 at the initiative of the representatives of 150 NGOs. It seeks to stimulate and support the activities of its members. Its main activities are in the fields of legal matters; matters relating to women and youth; ecological and economic matters and social and humanitarian matters. The members of the National Association play an active role in raising society's awareness of gender issues.

The National Association has established an Uzbekistan NGO Support Fund to attract and accumulate financial resources and provide technical assistance to its members. To date, it has conducted four bids for grants.

Experts from the National Association represented it in 2006 during the 36th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women.

It is evident that women's NGOs put a great deal of effort into improving women's qualifications, vocational training and retraining. Over 44 per cent of women trained by NGOs have acquired a profession or improved their qualifications thanks to women's organizations. This demonstrates that women's NGOs in Uzbekistan have become part of society, and, most importantly, that by founding such organizations, women are seeking to fulfil their potential and bring their issues to the fore.